

*"Ik ga vliegen,
Ik ga de leeuwerik achterna."*

Tot ons verdriet is, na een moedig gedragen ziekte,
overleden mijn lieve man, onze vader, broer en opa

Bert Higler

Hilversum, 29 september 1939

Leersum, 30 augustus 2010



Bert Higler, an active and diversified Trichopterologist, died on the evening of 30 August 2010 in his house in Leersum (The Netherlands). Near the end of his last day, he had refused pain medication and died peacefully. He is survived by his wife Eiko, three children, and three grandchildren.

Born on the 29 September 1939 in Hilversum, The Netherlands, Bert often referred to the great poverty through which his and many other Dutch families had to struggle during and after World War II. Experiencing a second period of financial difficulties after a divorce, the shortage of many of the basic things of life deeply shaped his personality. The main lesson that he has learned from these experiences was to share his joy for things in his life that he could afford with others.

One joy he could always afford was observing nature. When he was just 13 years old, he started to document these observations in a diary (in 1952), to which he added hundreds of entries until 1961. In the first 12 months alone, the diary has notes about 52 excursions. Most of these trips were between March and October, so one wonders how he got along at school! According to his son, he failed the final exam the first time that he took it but according to his sister,

he subsequently finished with an exam providing access to financially more lucrative careers than that of a biologist, but he chose his first love.

At the beginning, his diary describes numerous observations on the habits, biology, and behavior of all types of organisms. His first documented excursion was with a group of men that provided him with "skilful guidance" on a trip to a forest having, among many other birds, plenty of magpies. He illustrated one specimen in its natural habitat on this trip. He stayed with this habit of adding illustrations to his written observations and the early period of the diary has hundreds of sketches, which were often not larger than a postage stamp (see Fig. 1 for a few examples and note that he illustrated his first caddis larva at the age of 13 in April 1953). These illustrations demonstrate an advanced ability for his age to capture the details of an observation with a few strokes of a pen. In addition to the treatment of individual taxa, early entries in Bert's diary document the habitat use by assemblages in a more holistic way (see Fig. 2 for an example on birds on a pond). Throughout, these early illustrations and texts witness his deep respect and passion for nature, and an immense happiness when he was out in the field. And he knew how to share these feelings with others.

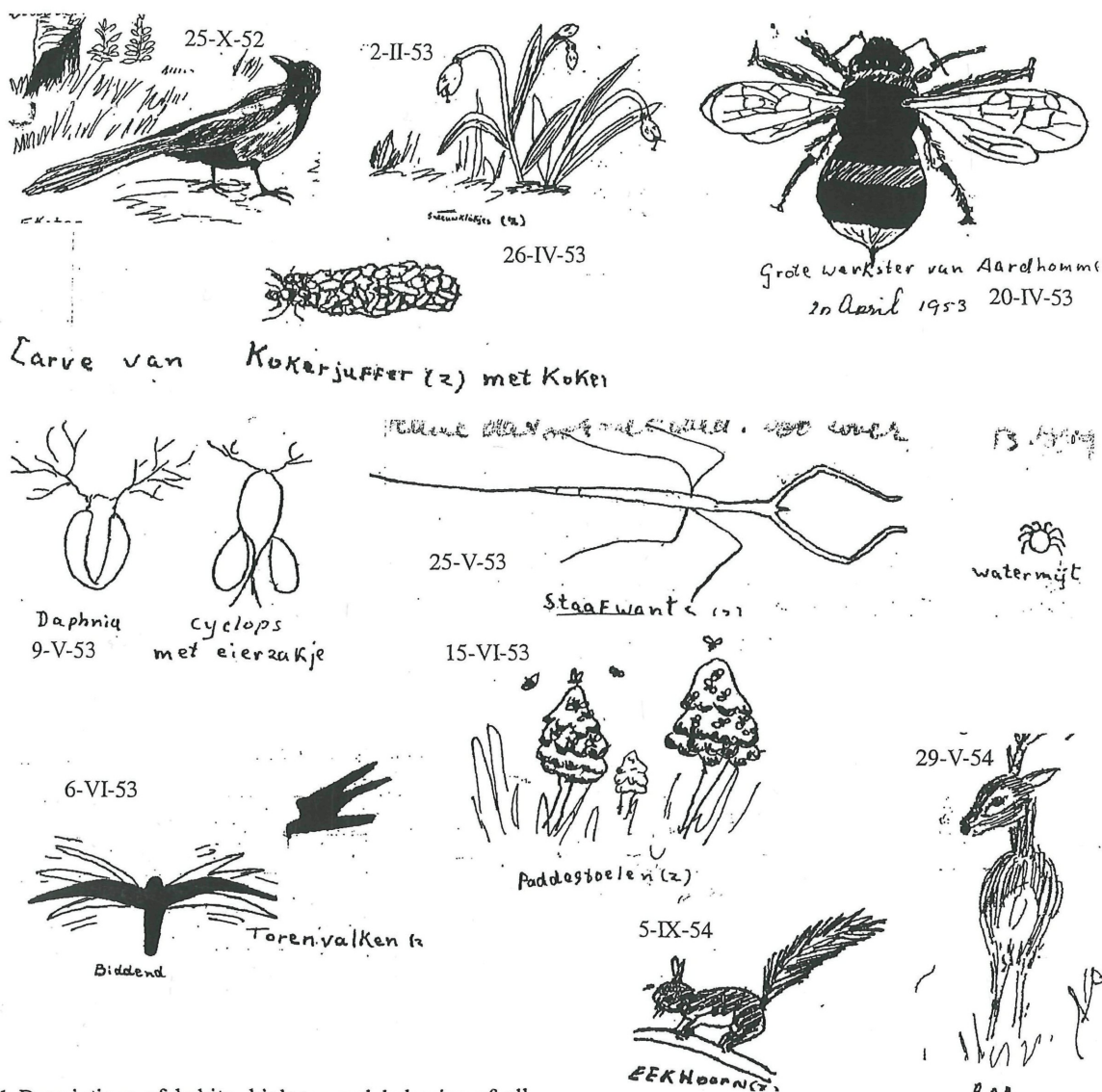


Fig. 1 Descriptions of habits, biology, and behavior of all types of organisms

For example, when he had discovered something remarkable for himself, he took his little sister on the next possible occasion to show her his “miracles” of nature, and later he initiated his son into nature observations. Since then, both his sister and son have had an everlasting love for nature and still go regularly watching birds or dragonflies. Throughout his life, Bert used this ability to share his passion for nature with others to stimulate the interest of numerous people in going out into the field.

Over the decade that they cover, his notes changed from detailed qualitative to short quantitative descriptions such as the censuses of birds in 1961 (see Fig. 3 for an example). Despite this change, however, he continued to testify the authenticity of each note with his signature.

At this time, he was already working as a professional, as he had become a research assistant at the "Dutch Institute for Nature Conservation Research" in 1960. His first two professional reports were on a census of black-headed gulls and the water bug assemblages on the island Ameland, both of which were published in 1962 in scientific journals. These early professional products of Bert were followed by about 50 reports and about 150 publications up

to his death. In the beginning, he published frequently on macroinvertebrates (particularly water bugs) in all types of freshwaters, including warnings of negative effects of human impacts on freshwater ecosystems (e.g. 1964: “De Hierdense Beek in Gevaar”). These topics interested him throughout his life.

His first study primarily dedicated to caddisflies dates from 1968 and considered the quantitative distribution of polycentropodids and hydropsilids across a gradient of *Stratiotes* vegetation in a Dutch broad (or canal). Subsequently, he received his first academic title (approximately equivalent to a Masters degree) with a study on the chromosomes of caddisflies and was promoted to a position as macroinvertebrate researcher in 1969. In 1974, his introduction to the knowledge of freshwater invertebrates (illustrated simple keys, advice for sampling and conservation, ecological principles, and indication of pollution) was published by the "Dutch Society for Field Biology" (KNNV, with which he cooperated throughout subsequent years) to foster an old Dutch tradition "for children growing up to collect animals in the numerous ditches and pools we have in our country". In the same year,

the three of us met for the first time at the first caddisfly symposium held in Lunz, which was the beginning of a long-lasting friendship beyond scientific co-operations.

After his PhD dissertation on "Macrofauna-coenoses on *Stratiotes* plants in Dutch broads" in 1977, Bert advanced in his career and later (1985–1999) was chosen as head of the department "Hydrobiology" (subsequently "Aquatic Ecology") of the "Research Institute for Nature Management" (subsequently "Institute of Forestry and Nature Research"). In that period, he studied caddisflies typically in the evenings or on weekends, when he was working on illustrations for his planned larval key for the Netherlands. Tired from the frequent administrative reorganizations of his institution and the growing demand to acquire more and more external money to keep his department running, he worked on a part-time basis in the department of "Freshwater Ecology" ("Alterra-Green World Research") until he retired in 2004. On that occasion, a mini-symposium had been organized in his honour and the two of us had the pleasure to celebrate him in our talks and particularly in a subsequent joint trip we made to various tourist places of his country.

Bert finally got his Dutch larval key (in 2005) and the atlas of the caddisfly distribution across the Netherlands (in 2008) published. These two books synthesized his life's work with and for the caddisflies.

After retirement, Bert returned to his favorite boyhood occupation and spent much of his time observing nature, light-trapping with amateurs to collect caddisflies, helping to identify specimens, and he started to work on a key for the Dutch adults of the order, which he could not finish in time.

Beyond his passion for nature, Bert liked many other things. He had travelled through numerous countries to gain knowledge of other cultures, their languages, food, and drink, and was particularly happy in Japan (the native country of his second wife). He liked to sing in a chorus and was pleased that he found more time for this hobby after his retirement. Physical exercises such as baseball, X-country ski, or badminton were also his passions when he was younger, which he substituted by walking his dog through the forest or chopping firewood when he was older.

And he liked the many friends he had. For him, a perfect day with friends was cutting dead oaks in the forests surrounding his house, having a nice aperitif followed by a delicious Japanese dinner prepared by his wife, and finishing by smoking a pipe over a chess game. Among his traits that we liked particularly was his ability to comfort other people through the fun and laughter that he could evoke in others, even when he or his company felt unhappy. Perhaps many of us will miss him most because of this wonderful trait.

We thank Eiko Kondo-Higler, Bas Higler, and Hanneke and Peter Bus for providing material for this obituary.

Bernhard Statzner & Vincent H. Resh

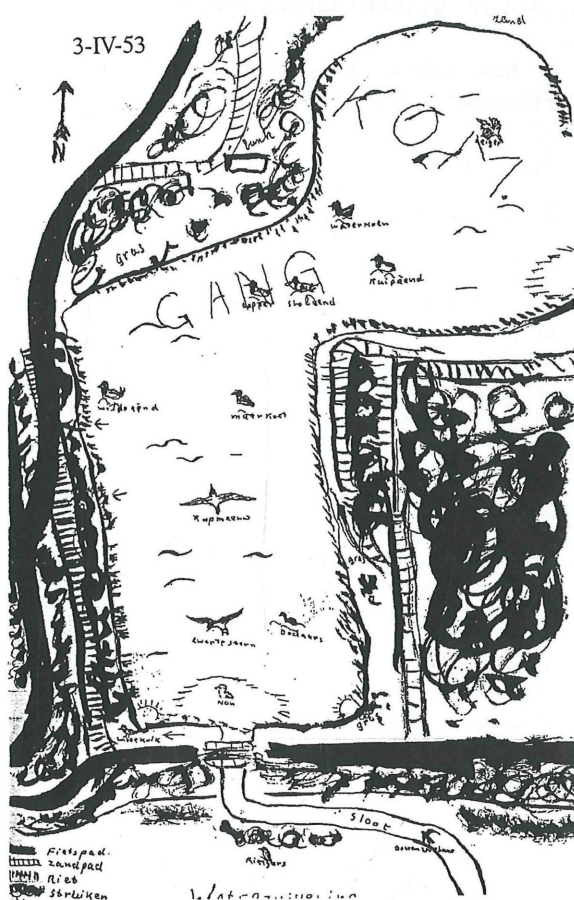


Fig. 2 Description of habitat use by birds

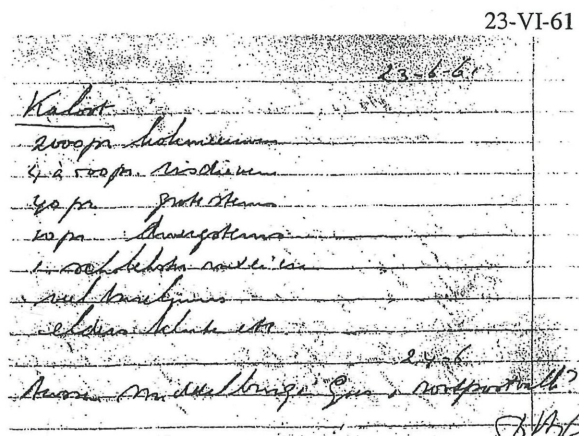


Fig. 3 Notes from a bird census